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ABSTRACT

The sex role stereotypes that are introduced to young readers on the elementary level are reinforced by the literature taught in the high school classroom. A list of the images of women taken from examples of high school literature could include, among others, the nurturing mother, seductress, sex object, and self-sacrificing wife. In all of these images, marriage is a necessity for a woman and the "old maid" image is an undesirable one. Little is offered regarding the relationship in marriage; the woman's role is defined strictly within the confines of the home and child-rearing. The male sex role stereotype, on the other hand, is very active and aggressive and dominates most high school selections. Man displays prowess and the ability to meet challenges victoriously. Although this role model is as destructive for society as that of the woman, the fact remains that literature reinforces man as the active, dominant agent in society, while portraying woman as passive and subordinate. (MAI)

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STEREOTYPED IMAGES OF WOMEN IN LITERATURE

*WALTA RUFF

> A famous surgeon was a passenger in a car driven by his teenage son. "I'll drop you at the hospital, Dad," said the young man.
>
> "Fine, son," said his father. Those were his last words; a wildly careening convertible crossed the center strip and ran headlong into the car. At the emergency room the father was pronounced dead on arrival; the son was taken for emergency surgery. The surgeon called to the scene reached for a scalpel but paused: "I can't operate," the surgeon said; "this is my son."1

Listeners are to explain the surgeon's remarks. Answers suggested range from supernatural intervention to step-fathers and adoption. Seldom do people propose the correct answer. The surgeon was his mother.

Mary Anne Ferguson, in the introduction to her book Images of Women in Literature, uses this riddle and suggests that the people bewildered by it undoubtedly represent the majority today who continue to believe that surgeons should be male and that woman's place--or certainly mother's place--is in the home. Many would argue that this belief is invalid, or at least not worth much further discussion since so many women do work and the percentage of working women is much more likely to increase than decrease. But it does represent one image that persists in the minds of many people.

Images of women are not confined to appearances in literature, but rather when they appear in literature are a reflection of images of women in the society-at-large. Perhaps these images should be called stereotypes, a term taken from printing which refers to metal plates used to make and reproduce exact copies. Stereotypes of character, however, differ from metal ones in that character stereotypes need not duplicate the pattern exactly. If the basis of the stereotype is present, the reader or observer fills in the missing characteristic. For instance, the pattern begins "homemaker" and the observer fills in "happy," "mothering," "church-going," and "loving." Yet these are judgements made without evidence. They are prejudices.

The stereotypes are so pervasive in society that we aren't prepared to defend against them. Literature is by no means the first place they appear in a person's experience. All media, such as television, religious doctrine, popular songs, folklore, teachers, parents, contribute their own

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degree of reinforcement of stereotypes. How important are these stereotypes? They represent much of our concept of proper and improper behavior, ultimately our concept of what is right and what is wrong. Defying a stereotype is difficult, but recognizing one is the initial problem because it is so subtle. The process of identification is a process of consciousness raising, a process of recognizing at what point we make predictions and demands of how a person should behave, based primarily on expectations derived from association, rather than on verified knowledge of the person as an individual. That person frequently is ourself.

Any number of these stereotypes exist: a quick list of female stereotypes could include woman as nurturing mother and domineering mother; as madonna and evil seductress; as sex object and wifely helpmeet. If you detect that these pairs are opposites, I assure you the placing was intentional. The irony in these opposites is that extremes are characteristic of the roles assigned to women in society and reflected in literature. A woman is lustful--or she's frigid; she's kind and loving--or she's a shrew. She's passive-or aggressive. She's possessive--or self-sacrificing. The middle ground, the standard for these measurements, is the same: male characteristics are the norm and female characteristics either are better or worse, not on par.

The stereotypes persist in literature, because they persist in society, and we begin to introduce them to readers at a very young age. Young female children are given images in literature that encourage them to accept society's definitions. There are very few signals to help children to withstand the strength of stereotype molding.

A Task Force of the Central New Jersey Chapter of the National Organization for Women has published a pamphlet entitled Dick and Jane as Victims in which they have compiled the results of a survey of 134 elementary school readers from fourteen different publishers. These readers were contributed by the school systems in three suburban New Jersey towns where they are currently in use. Content analysis was made on the basis of such things as active mastery themes, adult role models, biographies, and number of references to male and female characters. The whole pamphlet is full of fascinating information, but perhaps the following list will demonstrate that women, their roles, abilities and expectations, don't rate highly. In these 134 elementary readers, adult males filled a variety of 146 different occupations, ranging from scientist, to astronaut, to dentist, to TV news reporter. Adult females, on the other hand, filled a variety of twenty six different occupations. I have no doubt there will be sufficient explanation of these if I simply present the list.[2]

acrobatist	ice skater
author	librarian
baby sitter	painter
baker	parent

cafeteria worker	queen
cashier	recreational director
cleaning woman	school crossing guard
cook	school nurse
doctor	secretary
dressmaker	shopkeeper
fat lady in circus	teacher
governess	telephone operator
housekeeper	witch

> There are broad social implications in the use of sex role stereotypes which are seldom considered in connection with the readers. Children are exposed to conventional sex stereotypes long before they learn to read. The attitudes shown by friends and family, television and books are among the influences which have already begun the process of socialization. School readers have a special place in this process. They convey official approval. In many states, they have to be approved by state officials since they are bought with state money. They are used in state public schools which are attended under state compulsion until a certain age is reached. They are presented to children within a context of authority, in the classroom. Finally, every child must read them. Through the readers, society says, "This is what we would like you to be."[3]

Children's introduction to reading, the primary school readers, reinforces society's images of women, and the pattern continues in much the same way from then on. Following are excerpts from pieces of literature often used in high school classes. "In adolescence," Kate Millett says in Sexual Politics, "the merciless task of conformity which gender places upon one grows to crisis proportions...."[4] Society's stereotypes are encouraged in much of the literature presented frequently in high school classrooms.

If one female image particularly is encouraged in high school halls, perhaps it is the sex object or seductress. Images in literature that reinforce such a role are plentiful, even on the shelves of public schools. In the popular book My Darling, My Hamburger by Paul Zindel, the two females are Liz and Maggie. If the names alone don't give you a clue as to which is sexually alluring and which isn't, a brief characterization from the book will.

> "Hello, Dennis," Maggie said as she came down from upstairs.
>
> "Hi."
>
> Maggie looked gigantic in a dark blue dress with a flaring skirt and pinched-in waist, but her hair didn't look to bad--for brown hair.

There was a long silence while everyone waited for his reaction. "You look very pretty tonight," he finally managed. What else could he say? ....

Dennis tried to figure out what it was about Maggie's face that made her unusual tonight. She looked better than when Sean had first pointed her out in the hall. Not exactly a doom date, though categorically she wasn't his type. Probably the worst thing about her was the five-and-ten-cent-store diamond heart she wore on the collar of her dress....

Sean drove into the parking lot next to the movie house and stopped the car. "We're late," he said, obviously annoyed.

"Do you like my dress?" Maggie asked [Liz] while the boys were buying the tickets.

"It looks like you made it," Liz said.

"I did."

"It looks it."

"You don't have to keep saying it. I guess the pleated front makes me look fatter--"

"Oh, Maggie, you're supersensitive," Liz said. "Dennis won't be looking at the pleats.

"I feel ill."

"The pleats make you look very feminine."[5]

Paul Zindel didn't invent the image of the heavy-set, brown-haired girl who can't compare in sex appeal with her glossy-haired, slender friend. The definitions are from our society, widely-accepted, seldom challenged. And they are reinforced in the literature that is widely-read, especially by the age group so intensely affected by the image. In the same book, Liz, the glossy-haired, slender beauty is used, as any object is designed to be. It happens she is an object of sex. Liz gets pregnant, begins planning marriage to her now reluctant boy friend, is jilted, and has an illegal abortion. Mary Anne Ferguson explains a common pattern in this way.

...many 20th-century male authors, involved mostly in a quest for self-identity, have justified men's treatment of women as sex objects to be used instead of loved on the grounds that modern women are all bitches and castrators who interfere with or deny men's search for identity. Women are seen as reinforcing society's pressures for conformity to its cultural patterns and hence as denigrating individuality. Any "red-blooded American male" must resist women's encroachment on his inalienable right to be himself; he feels justified in protecting himself by having only temporary

liaisons with women and by having sex without love.[6]

I frankly doubt that Paul Zindel is trying to justify Sean's treatment of Liz in My Darling, My Hamburger. I'm also sure he, as an author, sees all of the adolescents he writes about, male and female, in a quest for identity. However, the identities they operate from and look for are patterned after the standard stereotypes that derive from standard sex roles. In the last scene of the book, Maggie, still heavy-set and brown-haired, is sitting at her high school graduation exercises. She lowers her gaze and examines her hands. "It was the first time she had actually looked at her own hands with the same scrutiny she gave to other people's. The fingers on the white dress, the fingers which might never have an engagement ring on them."[7] Apparently Maggie hasn't acquired new images.

The necessity of marriage for a woman is implicit in the literature that high schoolers read. The necessity does not derive so much from the images of housewives surrounded by adoring families, though there are some of those, too, but more from striking images of what happens to unmarried women. Some of you know William Faulkner's story "A Rose for Emily." It's often used in high school classes. Briefly, the story concerns a woman who missed her chances for marriage. But she kept a man: she poisoned him, put him in her bed, and slept with him every night for many years, until her death. The third paragraph of the story quickly establishes Emily's mentality. Notice that all women are implicated along with Emily.

> Alive, Miss Emily had been a tradition, a duty and a care; a sort of hereditary obligation upon the town, dating from that day in 1894 when Colonel Sartoris, the mayor - he who fathered the edict that no Negro woman should appear on the streets without an apron - remitted her taxes, the dispensation dating from the death of her father on into perpetuity. Not that Miss Emily would have accepted charity. Colonel Sartoris invented an involved tale to the effect that Miss Emily's father had loaned money to the town, which the town, as a matter of business, preferred this way of repaying. Only a man of Colonel Sartoris' generation and thought could have invented it, and only a woman could have believed it.[8]

Now that women conveniently are lumped into one mold, it becomes an easy matter for an impressionable reader to make judgements about all unmarried women on the basis of Emily's characteristics. Emily becomes a recluse, her appearance is unkempt, and her behavior is at first strange, then crazy.

But don't you have your own stereotypes of the old maid image? In a class I teach, we read "The Storyteller" by Saki. An aunt is

traveling in a railway coach with three small children. Also in the coach is a bachelor who obviously is annoyed by the children's noise and questions. The aunt tells a boring, moralistic story to entertain the children, who quite apparently are not entertained. So the bachelor tells a story of a good little girl who comes to a terrible end, and the children are delighted.

I asked my class if the aunt were married or not. The story, incidentally, never tells the reader. Most of the students said she was an old maid; no further explanation was added. Only a few realized that they couldn't verify that she was unmarried, but without exception they judged she was unmarried because she had all of the characteristics of an old maid.

What message does this stereotype give to female students? It says, loudly and clearly, that anything that could happen to you in marriage is preferable to being unmarried.

Does the literature that high schoolers read tell them about what could happen to women in the relationship of marriage? Most often, it tells them that they will stay home, tend to their knitting, and raise children. They may do this with varying degrees of success, but that is what they will do. They will not assert themselves beyond the domain of their homes. Most high school students read "Under the Lion's Paw" by Hamlin Garland. In the story is the housewife's ideal, Mrs. Council. She's large, jolly, and motherly. When some weary travelers happen by the farm, Mr. Council brings them into the house. Notice the motherly, housewifely images.

> "Mother," he shouted, as he neared the fragrant and warmly lighted kitchen, "here are some wayfarers an' folks who need sumpthin' t' eat an' a place t' snooze." He ended by pushing them all in.
>
> "Come right in, you little rabbits. 'Most asleep, hey? Now here's a drink o' milk f'r each o' ye. I'll have s'm tea in a minute. Take off y'r things and set up t' the fire." ....
>
> Going on in this easy way, she soon had the children filled with bread and milk and the woman thoroughly at home, eating some toast and sweet melon pickles, and sipping the tea.
>
> "See the little rats!" she laughed at the children.
> "They're full as they can stick now, and they want to go to bed. Now, don't git up, Mis' Haskins; set right where you are an' let me look after 'em. I know all about young ones, though I'm all alone now. Jane went an' married last fall. But, as I tell Council, it's lucky we keep our health. Set right there, Mis' Haskins; I won't have you stir a finger."

> It was an unmeasured pleasure to sit there in the warm, homely kitchen, the jovial chatter of the housewife driving out and holding at bay the growl of the impotent, cheated wind.[9]

Mrs. Council is a stereotype. She is kind, nurturing, understanding, efficient, loving, and above all self-sacrificing. Sufficient repetitions of this role model infer that a woman who doesn't measure up to the "feminine" success of this stereotype hasn't fulfilled female role obligations.

It seems to me that in much of the literature high school students read, the message is this: if an adult woman is uppity enough to assume any but the docile, passive, satisfied homemaker role, she's going to get into trouble, and there might not always be a man around to help her. If she stays where she belongs, she might get into trouble anyway, but she's more likely to be safe and secure. At least there will be a man around to solve the major difficulties.

To now I have been talking about images of women in literature. If I were to pick out a single sex-role image characteristic of high school literature, however, it would be, quite simply, the absence of women: either total absence of female characters or absence of female characters who are fully developed as people or who contribute to the unfolding of significant story action.

Carolyn Heilbrun, in an article in the January 29, 1972, Saturday Review, has called this the "masculine wilderness." It is explained as a fictional escape into the territory where women do not go, where civilization cannot reach, where men hunt one another like animals and hunt animals for sport."[10] She sees it as a particularly U.S. American phenomenon, where we have a history of wresting life from the hardships of the pioneer experience and celebrate the manly virtues of aggressiveness and violence, thus relegating women to a place outside the meaningful life.

Verification of this conclusion is so extensive I hardly know how to make it most effective. The presence of a female in a major, well-defined role is a cue to passive experience. This is not the stuff of which attention-getting stories are made. A grizzly bear hunt, life on the rodeo circuit, athletic competition, space travel: a man shows his prowess, his maturation, his ability to meet challenges and be victorious. He survives by his own ingenuity and cunning. Sometimes this means he has to resort to strategy, skill, power, and violence. But he can. Male role models in literature are preponderantly active and aggressively successful. Women do not belong in this kind of role, by the definition of society's stereotypes, and they're not written into it.

The most offensive of the male-dominated literature is that which celebrates the values of aggressiveness and violence. A gold miner de-

fends his rich claim from an intruder. They fight with guns, fists, and wits until finally the miner gets the upper hand. "The pocket miner fired again and again, until the revolver was empty. Then he tossed it from him and, breathing heavily, sat down on the dead man's legs."[11]

I don't mean to infer that the lack of female characters in literature should be remedied simply by substituting females for males in such scenes as this one from Jack London's story "All Gold Canyon." These role images are destructive to human beings. Males with literary role models such as these are victimized just as much as women are. Males are encouraged to perpetuate separation between what men can do and what women can do. They are encouraged to subordinate their own inclinations to all feelings that society designates as "feminine" and to patronize these inclinations in other people, even in females. I do contend, though, that the masculine wilderness is preponderant in much literature presented to high school students, and it gives females little opportunity to find identity.

Another neglect of female identity is in a book, used in many high schools, entitled Biographies of Famous American Men and Women. Twenty-five of the biographical sketches are of men and two are of women. A course offered at the school where I teach was, until last winter, called Famous Men of Action. I'm pleased, however, the course now is called Famous Men and Women of Action. Finding materials might be the next significant problem.

I could cite more story excerpts, but the point still would be this. Men are encouraged to be the active agents in our society. Literature basically reflects and reinforces society. Since the schools perform the same function, they are well-equipped with materials that perpetuate active, dominant male roles and passive, subordinate female roles. Most often we are what our society asks us to be. Unfortunately, "...women who accept society's definition of them have no self-definition as individuals; they have nothing to withstand the strength of the stereotype's molding."[12]

Footnotes

1. Mary Anne Ferguson, Images of Women in Literature (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1973) p. 1.

2. Dick and Jane As Victims (Women on Words and Images, A Task Force of the Central New Jersey Chapter of the National Organization for Women, Princeton, New Jersey, 1972) p. 53.

3. Ibid., p. 33.

4. Kate Millett, Sexual Politics (Garden City: Doubleday and Company, Inc., 1970) p. 31.

5. Paul Zindel, My Darling, My Hamburger (New York: Bantam Books in arrangement with Harper and Row, 1971) pp. 8-9.

6. Ferguson, p. 21.

7. Zindel, p. 116.

8. William Faulkner, "A Rose for Emily" (The Faulkner Reader, New York: Random House, 1954) p. 489.

9. Hamlin Garland, "Under the Lion's Paw" (American Literature Themes and Writers, eds. G. Robert Carlson, et. al., St. Louis: McGraw-Hill Book Company, 1967) p. 407.

10. Carolyn Heilbrun, "The Masculine Wilderness of the American Novel," Saturday Review, January 29, 1972, pp. 41-44.

11. Jack London, "All Gold Canyon" (American Literature Themes and Writers, eds. G. Robert Carlson, et. al., St. Louis: McGraw-Hill Book Company, 1967) p. 43.

12. Ferguson, p. 23.